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`Children used as shields can be put in custody of welfare homes'

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Children used by their parents to `shield' them from police action during riots or illegal assemblies can be taken into protective custody by the authorities under the Child Protection Act 1991.

Criminal Investigation Department director Datuk Yaacub Amin said today `safe custody' meant that the police could refer the children to the Welfare Department to `protect' them from their own parents.

He said under section 13 of the Act, any protector or police officer who is satisfied on reasonable grounds that a child needs protection, may take the child into temporary custody.

Issuing a stern warning to those who exploited their children during illegal assemblies or gatherings, he said the police would not hesitate to take appropriate action under the Act if they had sufficient evidence.

Yaacub told the New Straits Times: "If our investigations reveal that parents had blatantly brought their children to a riot for use as shields against police action, we will place the children in the custody of welfare homes.

"This is because such uncaring attitude of parents only makes them unfit to look after their own children and we can, using the existing provisions in the law, separate the children from them, with the assistance of the Social and Welfare Department.

"We found that in recent demonstrations, illegal assemblies and rioting in Kampung Baru and Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman, several people had brought their children along without due regards for the children's safety.

"There has been one too many cases where parents had brought their children for illegal gatherings. Surely, the finger will be pointed at the authorities especially the police, should anything happen to them (children). This cannot go on, and we have to put a stop to it right now."

Yaacub said this after the launch of a pilot project of the Safe City Initiatives at Bangsar Baru today. Also present were Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak who launched the project, Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Abdul Rahim Noor and city police chief Datuk Kamaruddin Ali.

Yesterday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had said that violence could endanger the lives of demonstrators, including their children who were being used as shields.

Dr Mahathir advised the people to steer clear of such demonstrations as it would not benefit anyone.

Forseeing the seriousness of the scenario where parents use children as shields during demonstrations, Yaacub said the police had discussed the matter with the city Welfare Department recently.

In a related development, National Unity and Social Development Minister Datin Paduka Zaleha Ismail today reminded protestors not to use women and children in illegal assemblies.

"Children should be the first to be protected in any dangerous situation and should not be brought along to be used as ransom to prevent action by the authorities," she said when commenting on the riots on Saturday night.

In the incident, police arrested 268 people, including 15 women and four foreigners, in Kampung Baru and near the Pertama and Sogo shopping complexes. In the previous week, police detained 160 people, including 17 women, in the city.

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